

# The Invisible Hand: The Power Of Language In Creating Welcoming Postsecondary Learning Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

*This manuscript discusses from the joint perspectives of an undergraduate student and a faculty member the often invisible role that language can play in providing postsecondary learning experiences that can either include or exclude students on the basis of social identity. The authors discuss ignorance, uncertainty, and political correctness as barriers to open communication about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other aspects of social identity. They then address writing about diversity and provide ideas for engaging in conversations about diversity in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** communication; diversity; inclusion; social identity

## INTRODUCTION

When welcoming someone into a space in the U.S., we commonly extend our right hand to shake hands in a gesture of friendship. However, for people with some types of mobility impairments and other disabilities, and people whose cultural identity prohibits physical contact with strangers, our extended hand may be a source of confusion, embarrassment, or even anger related to our ignorance of other cultural norms. Although we have learned that gestures and touch can be interpreted differently depending on culture, we continue to engage in this practice. We know that although perceived as welcoming by many, shaking hands may create barriers to participation for others. Similarly, our use of language can create unintentional barriers to creating welcoming learning experiences in higher education.

### Language As A Mechanism For Opening Doors Or Building Walls

The spoken and written word plays a significant role in communication, and thus language can have a very powerful effect on everyday life. As Evans and Herriott (2009) noted, “The way in which individuals are viewed is constructed by the words we use to describe them” (p. 28). Thus, as a means of communication, language has the capability to build relationships and to create barriers. At the surface level of discourse, single words such as “fat” or “dumb” demean whereas “beautiful” or “brilliant” act to uplift and encourage. Contrary to the popular saying (“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”), words do hurt. On an individual level they may cause emotional pain; at the systemic level they can result in stereotypes and discrimination. Words that pit “us” against “them” serve to divide and oppress and reinforce “society’s insistence on identifying and focusing on difference instead of sameness” (Evans & Herriott, p. 28). Riesman (Riesman, Glazer, & Denney, 2001) wrote, “Words not only affect us temporarily—they change us” (p. 89). Thus, the words we choose can influence how we think about ourselves and others.

Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Slatcher, and Pennebaker (2007) found that both men and women vocalize approximately 16,000 words during the course of each day. Of these 16,000 words, how many achieve their intended goals? How many of these utterances are used to comfort, inspire, stimulate, or encourage? How many are used to demean, humiliate, hurt, or attack? Given that words can have far more power than generally

acknowledged, it is critical to consider how language can affect interaction in increasingly diverse higher education settings.

### **The Roles Of Ignorance, Uncertainty, And Political Correctness**

From the standpoint of diversity, language is sometimes unintentionally wielded as a tool of oppression due to ignorance. Socially unjust terms pertaining to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, age, ability, and socioeconomic background are often used without thought for their historic roots or for the people they oppress. For example, the term *gypped*, commonly used to refer to situations in which a person feels cheated, is rooted in the word *gypsy* and unfairly perpetuates the stereotype that gypsies steal. People who are ignorant of the literal meaning or historical context of the word do not realize that it is demeaning to others.

Uncertainty regarding political correctness can also result in the misuse of language. Tregoning (2009) explained,

*Society and popular culture have drastically affected how professionals think about, struggle with, and use language. If we were not taught as young people that expressions like “fag”, “chick”, and “nigger” are extremely offensive and inappropriate, we quickly learn as young adults that in most circles this kind of language is not acceptable. Conversely, however, in the last few years, popular culture has increasingly reinforced the fact that being “politically correct” in our speech somehow amounts to taking diversity issues too far, or that some individuals are “just being too sensitive.” (p. 173)*

Because preferred terminology can change and may depend upon a number of factors including culture, geographic region, and age, educators with good intentions can become uncertain about how to identify another person. For example:

*Like other social justice movements, the disability rights movement has raised questions about language and identity as people with disabilities and their allies challenge terminology and assert their own definitions and identity claims. Terms once used to refer to people with disabilities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries such as defective, deaf and dumb, insane, and idiot have been challenged as oppressive. More recent terms such as retarded, handicapped, and mentally ill, acceptable only a few years ago, have been largely replaced by terms such as developmentally disabled and emotionally disabled. More recently, a “people first” movement has emerged that encourages the use of people with developmental disabilities or people with psychological disabilities so as not to define people by a particular physical or mental condition. (Griffin, Peters, & Smith, 2007, p. 335)*

The American Psychological Association (APA; 2010) has also recommended the use of “people-first language” (p. 76) when writing about persons with disabilities, but why not consider a people-first approach when addressing any aspect of social identity?

*Educators are also uncertain about the use of euphemisms for disability: Euphemistic terms, such as physically or mentally challenged and differently abled, despite their good intentions, have also been challenged by disability rights advocates who believe that they perpetuate ableism by trivializing the experiences of people with disabilities or minimizing the effects of disability oppression.*

*Many people with disabilities have redefined the term disabled, claiming it as a positive descriptor of a powerful and proud group of people with strengths and abilities, but “disabled” by unnecessary social, economic, and environmental barriers rather than by physical, psychological, or developmental conditions or impairments. Others reject the term disabled as a negative label forced on them by professionals who do not understand their needs or differences. In their view, they are not disabled but rather obstructed by negative interactions with controlling health and social service systems. (Griffin, Peters, & Smith, 2007, p. 336)*

Thus, as illustrated by this example focusing on disability, people within a given cultural group do not necessarily agree among themselves about the words they use to describe their social identity. To address confusion regarding terminology, Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) have suggested,

*Our guiding principle is to adopt terms preferred by people from targeted groups to name themselves: people of color rather than non-white; gay, lesbian, and bisexual rather than homosexual; people with disabilities rather than handicapped. . . . We know that naming is a necessarily fluid and sometimes confusing process as people/groups insist on defining themselves rather than acquiesce to names imposed by others. We encourage people to recognize that such terms will continue evolving and to appreciate the significance of the power to name oneself as an important aspect of group identity and resistance. (p. xxi)*

Reclaimed language further complicates the matter. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007, p. xxi) noted that “reclaiming by targeted communities of previously negative terms such as *queer*, *crip*, *girl*, and *trannie*” can have the effect of “reframe[ing] slurs as positive.” Despite the resulting empowerment of those to whom the word pertains, reclaimed words present a hazy situation in terms of which people are socially permitted to use the words (Aldridge, Thompson, & Winston, 2009). According to Tregoning (2009),

*The subtleties of language become more difficult when the same words spoken in-group hold a different meaning when used out-of-group. Terms used by some members of both the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and African American communities illustrate this effectively. Many members of the LGBT community have reclaimed and adopted the word “queer.” People want to be able to take a negative descriptor and turn it into a symbol of pride, alliance, and power within their community. The LGBT community followed in the footsteps of the African American community in doing this. Reclaiming the term “nigger” was and still is very controversial even within the African American community itself (Kennedy, 2002). . . . These words can be used within the community, but not by someone on the outside. (p. 174)*

In his rap, *N.I.G.G.A.*, Tupac Shakur (2004) transformed *nigga* into an acronym for “never ignorant about getting goals accomplished”, but this alternative perspective only further contributes to the confusion surrounding reclaimed language. It is important for postsecondary educators to assist students in navigating this complex issue.

### **The Power Of The Written Word**

The APA (2010) has provided helpful guidelines for reducing bias in writing, noting, “Long-standing cultural practice can exert a powerful influence over even the most conscientious author” (p. 71). The APA has asserted that

*Scientific writing must be free of implied or irrelevant evaluation of the group or groups being studied. . . . Part of writing without bias is recognizing that differences should be mentioned only when relevant. Marital status, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic identity, or the fact that a person has a disability should not be mentioned gratuitously. (pp. 70-71)*

One of the general guidelines provided by the APA (2010) is “Describe at the appropriate level of specificity” (p. 71). An issue that can arise is the use of “othering” language—words that recognize the existence of the dominant group, and then everyone else. From the perspective of social identities related to disability and sexual orientation, terms like *normal* as applied to individuals or populations imply that everyone else is abnormal; *special* when applied to educational programs and classrooms is often used in parallel construction with *regular*, to the extent that *special* is no longer perceived as positive, but rather irregular. Similarly,

*Authors sometimes use the word minority as a proxy for non-White racial and ethnic groups. This usage may be viewed pejoratively because minority is usually equated with being less than, oppressed, and deficient in comparison with the majority (i.e., Whites). (APA, p. 75)*

Minority also implies a numerical minority, which in some situations may not be mathematically accurate. In general, it is preferable to refer to a specific population rather than to lump groups together through the use of terms like *minority* or *nontraditional* that imply that in contrast there is a single, homogeneous *majority* or *traditional* group. It is also critical to recognize the myriad differences in identity existing within any social group.

The APA (2010) has also suggested that authors “Be sensitive to labels” (p. 72) and has recommended calling people what they prefer to be called while recognizing that “preferences change with time and that individuals within groups often disagree about the designations they prefer” (p. 72). As previously mentioned, people with disabilities have led the movement to encourage use of people-first language (p. 76). People-first language recognizes that people do not want to be identified by a single aspect of their complex constellation of social identities. A person with a disability may also identify as female, Polynesian, and Unitarian; there is no reason why this individual should be labeled—and often as a result stereotyped—according to disability. Verbs like *confined* and *suffering* when combined with disability status are also problematic because they perpetuate stereotypes that evoke pity and ignore that disability is a social construct. It is important to be aware of what our words convey and to follow guidelines to reduce bias not only in our own writing, but also when providing feedback on student writing.

### **Addressing Language And Culture In The Classroom**

Language’s ability to shape conversations about diversity is neither entirely positive nor negative, but rather encompasses both sides of the spectrum. Through social justice education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007) postsecondary faculty, staff, and students can utilize language to facilitate diversity-related conversations in a more constructive manner. The application of diversity and social justice training mechanisms in any course, regardless of academic discipline, can impact the power of language in conversations about diversity. Training can include sharing personal experiences within a group setting, using popular culture as a method of teaching, and reducing ignorance through the expansion of knowledge. Every person has had times in his or her life in which he or she has been hurt or empowered by language, just as every individual has at some point experienced being a member of a group targeted or advantaged by some form of oppression, whether racism, linguisticism (Nieto, 2003) or language discrimination (Darder, 1991), sexism, ableism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism and other forms of religious oppression, ageism, and so on. Reflections upon these experiences, particularly within a carefully-structured educational environment, provide situational insights as well as valuable life lessons that can be extrapolated to understanding the experiences of others. Similarly, discussions can center around situations in which group members have been either subjected to or witnessed inappropriate jokes, slurs, or other language targeting a specific aspect of social identity. Students should be encouraged to consider how they can work as allies to eradicate these forms of social injustice.

### **Using Popular Culture In Social Justice Education**

Many forms of oppressive language are introduced in popular culture, yet pop culture can also provide an avenue for teaching about social justice. Movies, news stories about current events, television shows, books, graphic novels, the Internet, and other forms of media provide ample material for discussion, and may be more successful in engaging students than traditional educational techniques. A student’s personal interest in a particular television show, for instance, may lead to a deeper examination of the impact of language on diversity than would a required reading or a class lecture. In this manner, diversity training becomes a natural and unforced byproduct of the pursuit of an activity already enjoyed by the student. Sometimes it is easier for students to focus on difficult topics by introducing scenarios rather than requiring students to begin by reflecting on their own behaviors.

For example, a scene from the film *School Ties* (Jaffe, Lansing, & Mandel, 1992) can deliver a powerful message about inclusion without being “preachy” while facilitating students’ development as they draw their own conclusions. On the day of his arrival, David Greene—a new senior and quarterback of the football team at a prestigious New England preparatory academy in the 1950s—is hanging out with his roommate and his friends, dancing to a recording of *Smokey Joe’s Café* by the Robins. One student asks another about his new “hi fi” record player. The response is, “He wanted 40 bucks but I Jewed him down to 30.” Another young man comments, “Look at him—he’s always trying to get something for nothing, and he’s not even Jewish!” Then the new house master enters and asks the students to turn off the music, saying, “I’m not going to bring the jungle into my house.” When David returns to his room, he takes off his T-shirt to reveal a Star of David on a chain. He pulls the chain over his head, removes his Curad bandage box from the bottom of his sock drawer, sticks the star and chain into the box, and pushes it back to the bottom of the drawer. Asked what happened in the scene, most students understand that David put away his “Jewish star” because of the anti-Semitic attitudes expressed by the other students. Fewer students

recognize the racist implications of the house master's comments about the Robins. Viewing this film clip can lead to important conversations about why students may choose to hide an important aspect of their social identity in response to the things being said around them.

### **Role Playing To Build Student Empowerment**

A rational segue from social justice awareness is situational awareness. In some senses, situational awareness is the next step up the ladder of diversity knowledge because it is the application of consciousness in everyday life. Living in a socially just manner is at times uncomfortable because it requires confronting ignorance and intolerance. For example, whether in an educational setting or a social setting, a person committed to social justice will feel obligated to address a sexist joke or a racial slur; remaining silent in this type of situation perpetuates the assumption that it is acceptable to engage in sexist or racist behavior. Taking a stand and speaking out against prejudice and stereotypes may not be welcomed by others. Social justice allies must be prepared to be criticized by those who question their motives, are embarrassed by what appears to be an accusation that they are sexist or racist (as in this example), or consider them "the political correctness police." One method for building and practicing social justice skills is role playing, which involves the simulation of a real-life situation as a means of teaching. Just as a muscle must be exercised in order to grow stronger, speaking out against the negative use of language with respect to diversity requires practice and experience. Consequently, role playing is valuable because it facilitates the necessary practice within a safe environment. Role playing can be effective in building confidence as well as learning respectful methods for addressing intolerance, and ultimately can lead to student empowerment. When empowered, students become responsible for bringing about change.

### **CONCLUSION**

Students can play a critical role in ensuring the development of welcoming learning experiences by examining the language they use in everyday interactions. Questions such as "what language am I using?", "what messages are my words sending?", and "what impact is my language having on others?" should be stressed throughout postsecondary curricula. Just as words can hurt, words can heal; students have the ability to use words and language constructively to create connections and embrace diversity.

Language is the invisible hand that possesses incredible power to hold people down or to give them a boost. The scope of one's grasp of language as a tool can shape or limit one's perceptions of the world. It is imperative that words and phrases convey the meaning that the speaker or writer intends. Students are likely to need instruction related to language to become aware of the power that their words can have.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

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